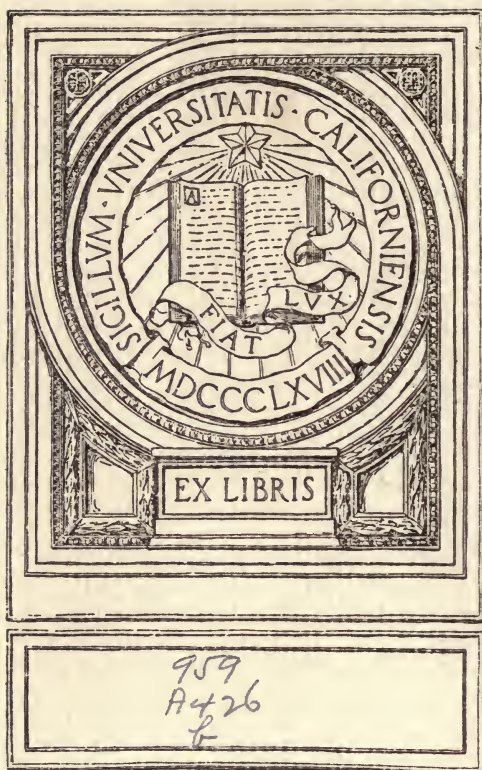


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The Bride of Huitzil

No 313

Henry Allen


*THE BRIDE OF
HUITZIL*

An Aztec Legend



BY

HERVEY ALLEN

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TO THE
ALBANY

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HERVEY ALLEN

To a dead child



THE BRIDE OF HUITZIL

I

*Here begins the first scroll with the sign of a
bundle of reeds tied about with a string,
which is the symbol of fifty-two years.*

IN Anahuac there reigned a king
Some fifty summers old,
The bloody darling of his gods,
Who sent him luck and gold
And captives from a thousand fights,
And victory in each war;

The Bride of Huitzil

No mercy kept within his heart—
He trusted in his star.
But doubts began to sap his mind,
For he was growing old.
The gods he feared might turn unkind;
He gave them plundered gold
And hung their images with hearts
Like roses on a bride,
And all the young slaves from the marts
On Huitzil's altars died.*
The priests got everything they sought.
They said the gods were wroth;
They had the rolls of tribute brought—
Chose bales of twisted cloth,
And cloaks of richest feather-work,
And opals set in gilt,
And many a keen obsidian knife
With carved and curious hilt,
And pearls for which their wives would quarrel,
And bags of cochineal,
And carefully matched and scarlet coral,
And chests of yellow meal,
And rainbow skins of quetzal birds,

* *Huitzilopochtli*, the Mexican Mars.

The Bride of Huitzil

Lip jewels, and each a ring;
And all they gave was doubtful words—
No comfort to the king.

Huitzil, they said, was sorely vexed;
Tlaloc would send no rain;
The more they kept the king perplexed
The more they had to gain.

“Gold I have given,” said the king,
“And victims for the feasts;
What more is there that I can bring?”

“Bring beauty!” said the priests.
“Send runners swift to each cacique*
With scrolls of your command;
In hut and palace bid them seek
Fair virgins through the land;
Then bring them here and choose the maid
Who most shall please your eyes,
And have her as your bride arrayed,
And led to sacrifice.”

So buzzing rumor rose and spread
Like locusts through the land;

* *Cacique*, Chief or lord of a district.

The Bride of Huitzil

The king would choose a wife, men said:
And chiefs on every hand
Snatched maidens from the cotton-looms,
Girls, grinding maize for cakes,
Captives for Tenochtitlan,
The city 'mid five lakes.
Across the causeways, borne by slaves,
The trembling virgins came;
They saw the Smoking Hill that laves*
Its molten sides in flame.
Canoes along the causeway's sides
Kept near; on rafts the throngs
Burned lamps to welcome home the brides;
Far rowers sang strange songs.

Now when the moon was fully grown,
The king left his abode
To sit upon the judgment throne
Set in the "Place of God,"
Massive with polished seat of jade;
A skull was his footstool.
The arras on the wall was made
Of beasts' hair wove like wool.

* *Popocatepetl*, which means the Smoking Hill.

The Bride of Huitzil

There, while a scribe announced the dower,
The women came, so fair—
Young warriors whispered, and their plumes
Bent, nodding, as when air
Of summer stirs the fronded trees
Along a mountain wall,
Where pigeons' wooings lull the breeze
And snow-fed rivers fall.

And so they passed from morn till noon:
First came a princess in;
Like polished bronze beneath the moon
Was her smooth, olive skin;
But rumor in the market place
Told of a strangled lover,
Of silver masks made of his face;*
The priests said, "Choose another!"
Then daughters of rich merchants came,
Dowered with silver T's.†
With downcast eyes, they were too tame;
Huitzil would none of these.

* A certain Aztec princess who enjoyed a new youth each night. After strangling him, she had his silver death mask made. Her chamber walls shone with their pale lustre.

† In ancient Mexico the money was cast in the shape of a 'T'.

The Bride of Huitzil

And daughters of Tlascala's chiefs,*
Bringing a precious dower—
Their fathers' friendship, with rich fiefs
Boasting a warlike power.
Pale girls from Huexotzinco's shades,
Where willows cool the air,
From far Tlaxcallan, sun-burned maids,
Bronzed in the cornfields there.
Girls from Cholula's pyramid,
Born by its terraced side—
The morning shadows waned and hid;
The king had found no bride !
Then came a maid straight as a spear,
Lithe as the bending maize
When only silk is in the ear;
Upon her eyes a haze.
She walked with all a panther's grace,
And like a pleasant tune
Her voice, and her round breasts were firm
As rosebuds in young June.
And as a cougar longs for meat,
The king desired the maid.
He cast an arrow at her feet—
A sign his choice was made.

* *Tlascala*, the Sparta of Mexico.

The Bride of Huitzil

The priests on twisted conch-shells blew,
Shouted the market place;
Hatred of Huitzil seized the king;
He loved the maiden's face.
She was a huntress, fair but poor,
Sleek puma skins her dower,
Traced through the jungle by their spoor
Past many a vine-closed bower,
Tracked to the hills and brought to bay,
Slain by the ice-green streams,
With the hissing arrow at break of day,
When the wakened eagle screams.
But when the high priest found the king
Had chosen her for bride,
He raged at heart to hear the thing—
“No dower” hurt his pride
And avarice; and straightway he sent
Down to the king's abode,
To say that sunset was the time
To bring her to the god.
The king's house rang with happiness
And sound of marriage gongs;
Ten maidens helped the bride to dress,
While slave girls sang old songs;

The Bride of Huitzil

She was arrayed in cloaks of plumes
From birds of paradise,
Woven on feather-workers' looms,
More gorgeous than bright dyes,
Lined with the down of humming-birds,
Trimmed with the parrot's wing;
And compliments as smooth as curds
And jewels came from the king,
And gifts brought by his brother's wife
With well dissembled smile—
Wishes for children and long life
Whispered with subtle guile.
Meantime the king had gone aside,
His heart and brain at odds
Whether to keep his lovely bride
Or give her to the gods.
At sunset, in a silver litter
He brought her through the city,
Still doubtful, and his heart grew bitter
Struggling with fear and pity.
White flowers fell before the maiden—
He crushed them with his feet.
The air with garden scents was laden,
Mad dancers filled the street.

The Bride of Huitzil

Before cruel Huitzil's pyramid
She waited for the king.
He loved her so, fear of the gods
Now seemed a foolish thing,
Something to laugh at and to scorn,
A sick thought he had dreamed,
Vaguely recalled at early morn—
So Huitzil's vengeance seemed.
Fresh courage flushed his veins, as spring
With new sap thrills an oak,
And he remembered he was king;
Never a word he spoke.
A grim smile sat upon his face;
He led her up the stair,
Up to the holy level space,
Where chanting smote the air.

Before the fire, priests knelt in lines.
A beast-mask was afoot:
Prayers droned like night-winds in the pines.
Painted with blood and soot,
The high priest cried, as though in prayer,
"Bring hither Huitzil's bride!

The Bride of Huitzil

Be swift, point out the victim, king!"
And she smiled by his side.
Gazing about with narrowed eyes
Like puma's in the sun,
While priests prepared for sacrifice,
He saw his brother's son—
How merciful to send him death
And spare him life's sure pains—
Death's but a stupor at the worst,
A languor in the veins !
Straightway he pointed out the child,
Who instantly was hid
By the swift dancers—in a breath
Across the pyramid
They swept him to the waiting stone,
Bull-rattles drowned his cries;
Before he died, he saw his heart
Held up before his eyes.
The high priest raged behind his mask,
But yet he dared not falter.
He joined the king to Huitzil's bride
Before the god's own altar,
Knowing the king's cup must be full
And vengeance would abide.

The Bride of Huitzil

That night the king laughed in his heart
And slept with Huitzil's bride.



*Here ends the first scroll with the picture of
a man sitting upon the ground,
which is the sign of an earth-
quake, or troubles
to come.*





II

*Here begins the second scroll with the picture
of a footprint, which is a sign that someone
goes upon a journey.*

THE king held revels in the town
Next evening, and there came
Chieftains and minstrels of renown
To taste the roasted game
And drink strong mescal to the bride,
But there no priests were bid;
Scowling, the high priest hied him down
From Huitzil's pyramid

The Bride of Huitzil

To the long palace in the town,
Where many litters fared,
And wrangling bearers set guests down,
And sputtering torches flared
With fluxing light along the walls,
And music's measured din
Sounded above the idlers' calls,
While rich guests hurried in.
The sentries talked before the doors,
But in a time of gloom
The priest sneaked in—down corridors—
Past many an empty room—
For all were at the king's repast;
Slaves near each darkened door
Slept by their earthen lamps. At last
He found upon the floor
The mother of the child he'd slain,
Pallid from many tears
Shed in her agony from pain
That scarcely dulls with years.
She knew him standing there.
Nothing was said.
Her face she covered with her hair
And lay as dead.

The Bride of Huitzil

"Hail, mother," said the priest,
"Where is your little one,
The king's dead brother's son ?
Does he sit with his uncle at the feast,
Whence they will bring him, sleepy,
to your side ?
Is he still smiling there
Where marriage torches flare,
And warriors drain the pulque to the bride?"

Then with a voice grown weak
with many tears,
She spoke, as in a dream, and said,
"Yours was the hand that slew him
on the stone—
You know that he is dead."
The far feasters shouted and he heard
her moan.

"Yes," said the priest, "Mine was the hand,
But by the king's command, not mine he died.
He died in place of Huitzil's bride
And needs no funeral,
For now he serves the gods

The Bride of Huitzil

In the high mountain glen
Where Huitzil sits at everlasting feast
And morning sunshine bathes the wall;
His spirit is at peace with them."
"It is his body that I want,"
The mother said, "His little feet—
Dear little feet, that I shall hear no more !
Each footfall was a stroke upon my heart;
His voice that called me 'mother' at the door;
What could the gods want with my child ?
His shoes wait still and empty by the bed,
And his soft kisses I shall feel no more,
Oh, he is gone—is dead !"

And then the priest poured in her ear
How the high gods were wronged;
How he had slain the lad from fear,
And how the bride belonged
To Huitzil—and the ruthless king
Slept in a cursèd bed.
"He lives," she gasped—fire swept her brain—
"And my sweet son is dead!"
"Avenge yourself!" replied the priest,
"Arise, put gladness on,

The Bride of Huitzil

Win near the king at his bad feast;
An hour before the dawn,
A priest will bring the holy dish,
The heart of your young son;
Persuade the king to grant this wish—
And your revenge is won:
Ask him to let you bless the sacrifice;
But you must choose
To taste the heart with him, lest otherwise,
Suspecting, he refuse;
But when you spread your hands to bless
the dish,
Bless with your lips and curse within,
And pray to Huitzil for revenge,
And drop this in.

It is a subtle pearl of death;
No more by her soft side
In dalliance, with deep-taken breath,
The king shall seek his bride,
But sleep will lead him to the couch of death,
And death to strange abodes;
Then you will be revenged,
And I shall claim his loved one for the gods.”

The Bride of Huitzil

She rose, and washed away her tears,
And put bright colors on,
Long pendant ear-rings in her ears—
Meanwhile the priest had gone—
She clutched the poison in her hand,
Resolved to play her part,
And by the great door took her stand
While rage surged in her heart.
The room shone with a noonday glare—
Torches on silver urns—
Steam from hot dishes rose in air,
Wild songs were sung by turns;
Huge turkeys in their feathers dressed
Smoked down the crowded board;
From earthen jars behind each guest
Brown slaves the pulque poured.
She stood long by the entrance door
And listened to the feast,
Bronze spear-butts rang upon the floor
In honor to the priest
Who brought the king the holy meat,
Hot from the temple fires—
Huge dish to hide so small a heart!
“Silence!” proclaimed the criers.

The Bride of Huitzil

The priest strode down the banquet hall,
The woman following after,
Chill silence fell upon them all.
The slave girls ceased their laughter.
He set the dish down, and they heard
The mumbled words of prayer.
The woman stood without a word;
No one could brave her stare.
Only a blind slave mouthed a bone.
A dog the silence broke—
Hunting in dreams, he gave a moan.
The king arose and spoke.

“Sister,” he said, “what brings you here,
Where weeping has no place?
Have you no tears for your dead child?
I see none on your face.”
“None;” said the woman, “I have wept,
But now I weep no more,
My tearful vigil has been kept.
Children have died before!
I come to show all Anahuac
No woman is above

The Bride of Huitzil

Bearing her children for the gods.
Duty is more than love!
Therefore, give me the holy dish
To bless it to your use,
For that is all I ask—a wish
Custom can scarce refuse.”
But the king tried the woman’s soul,
Delayed, and shook his head,
And held aloft the steaming bowl,
Pondered awhile, and said,
“Sup with me from the holy dish.
If you but taste the heart,
Then you may bless it as you wish,
And afterward depart.”
“Yea,” said the woman, “I will taste
The heart of my own son
If I may bless it; but make haste,
The night is nearly done.”
Smiling, he took away the cover.
She gave a cry and start,
Then spread her hands and held them over
The little smoking heart.
Trembling, she blessed with hands outspread,
But writhed and cursed within

The Bride of Huitzil

And prayed for vengeance on his head—
And dropped the sleep-pearl in.
Then stifling horror in her soul,
She tasted of the heart.
And then the king supped from the bowl,
And let her straight depart.
She sought her lonely, shadowed room,
And there, with fluttering breath,
She blew the light out, and in gloom
Slept to a welcome death.

Then a slave struck upon a gong,
And each guest
Departed with much talk,
And some with song;
And the bride left with her maidens
To their rest.
But the king sat sleeping there alone.
The torches died away,
Glimmering to their sockets in the stone,
While far dogs bayed
The last belated revelers going home.
Only the blind slave sat behind the door,

The Bride of Huitzil

Mumbling an endless tune,
Peering with eyeballs dim;
Outside there sank the moon,
But light and darkness were alike to him.



*Here ends the second scroll with the sign of
a skull set with turquoise stones,
which is the symbol of Coat-
licue, the Goddess
of Death.*





III

*Here begins the third scroll with the sign of a
man in a black canoe, which is the symbol
of a soul crossing the Lake of Death.*

AND no one dared awake the king—
He slept—to him it seemed
White vapor covered everything,
And through its rifts there gleamed
A figure striding through the mist;
Dimly he saw the head,
The white skull set with turquoise stones,
The goddess of the dead.

The Bride of Huitzil

Now at the hour before the dawn,
When owlets cease to call,
He put a cloak of black skins on
And walked forth from the hall,
Across the terrace, down the stair,
Along an empty street,
Where the lone watchman felt his hair
Rise at the soundless feet.
But to the dying king it seemed
As though he moved with ease
Upon a journey he had dreamed—
No weight above his knees—
So from his house he passed away,
Down to the stony strand
Where the black water of the lake
Whimpered against the land.
And there he hailed a boatman dim
Who gave a toothless scream
And motioned to wade out to him;
Cold as a mountain stream
He felt the lake rise to his chin;
It seemed to strike him through
And freeze his heart—but he plunged in,
And clutched the black canoe.

The Bride of Huitzil

And the blind boatman helped him up,
Gave him a drink of blood;
Far in the lake he tossed the cup,
And straight across the flood
They moved like stars across the night,
Passing a fisher's raft
Where, seated by a flickering light,
A brown child sat and laughed,
Kissing again her painted doll;
She screamed at the strange sight—
The shadowy boatman tall—
The boat as black as night.
And they passed fishermen's canoes,
Anchored in shallow spots
Where nets were staked—among the crews
Fires glowed in earthen pots—
And *chinampas*, where in tended rows*
White, cherished orchids grew.
They saw far mountain snows
Glimmer against the blue
Of night that now turned faintly gray,
And the wide lake grew flushed
With the first scarlet of the day

* *Chinampas*, Floating garden rafts.

The Bride of Huitzil

As on they rushed.
But the king looked toward the shore,
And saw they left no wake.
The long streak gleamed that shows before
The sun bursts on the lake.
Vague lay the city and the land,
Veiled by a rain—or tears—
Where he had ruled with ruthless hand—
Dreams mirrored back dead years :

*Childhood—and little shells brought to
his mother,
On the beach at sunset when the lake
grew dark;
Young faces of his playmates in old days,
And the first lusts of his strong youth.
The look of his first love, now long since dead;
And walks among the maize fields
with his friend,
And that great day the high priest
bailed him king—
Long lines of warriors charging home,
with streaming feathers,*

The Bride of Huitzil

*And the crash of shields,
The spurting arc of blood from one he smote
upon the neck in battle;
Houses and streets, and sights;
And cunning thoughts, and plans that
he had made in the dim city
There across the lake,
That he should see no more.*

But now they neared a porphyry cliff
Where lingered blacker night,
And from the prow of the dark skiff
The king beheld a light
That burned upon a landing place
Where a stream cleft the land,
And the torch showed his nephew's face
Shaded by one small hand.
There the king leaped ashore,
And followed up the steep ravine.
The naked child went on before;
On pools there fell the sheen
Of his young body in the light,
And the king heard his echoed calls

The Bride of Huitzil

And followed after through the night,
Up slippery waterfalls
On rough steps hollowed by the stream,
Up to the high plateaus
Where far across the valley gleam
Iztaccihuatl's snows.*
Then they glowed ruddy in the dawn
And the valley, one huge cup,
Lay shining, city and lake and lawn;
The sun was coming up.
In the morning light they stood alone
Upon a spine-like crest,
And the child took a jagged stone
Out from his empty breast,
And said, "The gods have sent you this;
They bid you to their feast.
The place you will not miss:
It lies due east."
Then in the shadows of the place
He seemed to melt away
As a smile fades from the face—
And it was day.

* One of the twin volcanoes in the valley of Mexico. The name means "The White Woman" from *cihuatl*, woman. The form of the mountain suggested the name.

The Bride of Huitzil

But the king pressed on across the plain
Where in long, dusty lines
The sand blew, for there fell scant rain;
The lizard with sharp spines
Hid mid the myriad cactus thorns,
And swifts would dart and cling,
And the toad blinked beneath his horns,
And birds never sing.
Ever the king rose higher,
Where gila monsters slept by dens
And the slopes grew drier—
Into the huge and solitary glens,
Wounds of a lonely world,
About whose beetling cliffs
The little clouds lay curled.

Framed at the end of one long vale
Was cleft a narrow gate,
A rocky entrance to the dale,
The only break
In the black cliffs to left and right;
It looked into the sky
As one square window frames the light.
To this the king drew nigh.

The Bride of Huitzil

Suddenly he heard
The sound of stricken metal,
Like a spoken word,
And loud ringing gongs,
The shivering clash
Of cymbals, and the crash
Of drums, and timbrels with the noise
Of piping, and shrill songs of gelded boys.
Around, around him swept a howling rout
Of dancers in the masks of beasts,
With toss of feet and arms about
Like crazy drinkers at wild feasts;
These swept him to the gate, and there
Back to the rock caves fled,
Leaving flat silence on the air
And a dumb dread.

But through the gate he made his way,
Cut in the hill's midriff,
And found the sun with whitest day
Beating upon a cliff
That fell sheer to the valley dim;
And when the clouds would lift,
He saw the far landscape swim

The Bride of Huitzil

Glimmering through the rift.
Then, reeling from the gaping height,
Back through a lava alley,
Stumbling on rocks in the half-light,
He came into a valley,
The hollow of a cup-shaped hill,
Where the long clouds lay
And all was gray and still.

There at their everlasting feast,
Around a table carved about
With many a tigerish beast
And faces, heavy-lipped, that pout
In stone, the gods sat—
Totec, parrot-faced, with stony stare,
And the water goddess fat,
With writhing serpents in her hair;
Huitzil, with flickering plumes
Of waving fire above his head,
And white-skulled Coatlicue,
The goddess of the dead;
Tlaloc, god of rain, with beryl eyes,
Who gloats on children brought
And slain to him with dismal cries,

The Bride of Huitzil

In withering times of draught;
And Tezcat, lord of sharp obsidian,
And Quetzalcoatl with his golden curls,
Worshipped at Tlacopan
With sacrifice at noontide hours
Of copal gum, while girls
Bring heaps of fruit and flowers.
In blue folds his snake was curled,
The holy snake with crest
Of feathers, lord of this green world,
Swathed in a rustling nest
Of maize leaves—the wise god,
That makes the rain, and harvest wave,
And the grain ripen in the pod.
Now a desperate courage seized the king;
He dropped his warrior's cloak
And threw away his plumes and ring,
Drew near, and spoke:

“Naked to judgment, Merciless Ones, I come,
Nor fear the tomb,
Knowing that what I did was done
By your own doom.”

The Bride of Huitzil

Then the gods counseled among themselves,
Muttering like summer thunder,
As when the distant earthquake delves
Beneath the hills, and wonder
Falls on the cities of the plain
At the vast, rocking rumble—
Then terror, and men flee in vain,
And the high towers tumble.
So spoke the gods, and a thick gloom
Came upon everything
While the serpent hissed their doom
Upon the king.

“One act of mercy spoils a life
Of fragrant slaughter full.
Since you are nothing—
Neither merciless nor merciful,
Your doom is this:
You shall be hurled
From a cliff
And this good world to nothingness.”
So spoke the serpent in a hiss.

The Bride of Huitzil

Then Huitzil seized a monster spear
And drove the king along the path.
His soul now first knew fear
At the beast laugh
The gods gave—once he looked back,
But following after,
Huge Huitzil strode upon his track,
Shaking with laughter.
Now the far valley burst upon his view
With rolling hill and plain,
Cloud-shadowed to the mountains blue.
He stood upon the cliff again—
Tottered—and heard an eagle scream—
Then suddenly he seemed to fall
As one falls in a dream.

* * * * *

Down in the palace in the town,
The king's body stirred and cried
A fearful cry, and startled slaves ran in;
And rumor spread that he had died.
Then came a loud uproar
And the priests raged outside,

The Bride of Huitzil

And with stone hammers smote upon the door
And Huitzil claimed his bride.



*Here ends the third scroll with the sign
of a closed eye, which is
the symbol of
death.*



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